Biography of an Educator: Deborah Meier

Deborah Meier is one of the leading educators and scholars on education in America today. Meier advocates through a variety of means including public speaking and publishing in journals, websites, and books. Within the Educational foundations book there are many education professionals at the top of their game, but I chose Deborah Meier because of her initiatives in creating small schools that she directly governs in the inner cities of America, putting her on the front lines where schools are suffering the most. This mirrors my own career choices, focusing my work at an inner city neighborhood school in Chicago where I was able to build a program and be at the forefront of critical problems that plague are school systems today. In personal experience, as a respected representative of education reform, Meier was invited to speak at an education forum in Chicago at Navy Pier last year which I attended, hosted by National Public Radio. I was able to hear her thoughts on education in Chicago, as well as the debate between public vs. private education, and education public policy in general.

**Deborah Meier has led an impressive career spanning decades in education, constantly striving towards improving schools, creating her own, and delving into new projects and opportunities as they present themselves. Deborah W. Meier** is currently at New York University’s [Steinhardt School of Education](http://education.nyu.edu/), as senior scholar as well as Board member and director of New Ventures at [Mission Hill](http://www.missionhill.org), director and advisor to [Forum for Democracy](http://www.forumforeducation.org/) and Education, and on the Board of [The Coalition of Essential Schools](http://www.ccebos.org). (Meier 2010)

Meier was born April 6, 1931 in New York City; she attended Antioch College (1949-51) and received an MA in History from the University of Chicago (1955). She has received honorary degrees from Bank Street College of Education, Brown, Bard, Clark, Teachers College of Columbia University, Dartmouth, Harvard, Hebrew Union College, Hofstra, The New School, Lesley College, SUNY Albany, UMASS Lowell, and Yale. She was a recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 1987. (Meier 2010)

Meier has spent more than four decades working in public education as a teacher, writer and public advocate. She began her teaching career as a kindergarten and head start teacher in Chicago, Philadelphia and New York City schools. (Meier 2010) From the very beginning Meier started work in some of the largest cities in the country which faced the some of the biggest problems in regards to poverty, ethnic diversity, language diversity, and education equality. She was the founder and teacher-director of a network of highly successful public elementary schools in East Harlem. In 1985 she founded Central Park East Secondary School, a New York City public high school in which more than 90% of the entering students went on to college, mostly to 4-year schools. During this period she founded a local Coalition center, which networked approximately 50 small Coalition-style K-12 schools in the city. (DeborahMeier.com)

Between 1992-96 she also served as co-director of a project (Coalition Campus Project) that successfully redesigned two large failing city high schools, and created a dozen new small Coalition schools. She was an advisor to New York City’s Annenberg Challenge and Senior Fellow at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University from 1995-1997. (Meier 2010)

From 1997 to 2005 she was the founder and principal of the Mission Hill School a K-8 Boston Public Pilot school serving 180 children in the Roxbury community.

The schools she has helped create serve predominantly low-income African-American and Latino students, and include a typical range of students in terms of academic skills, special needs, etc. There are no entrance requirements. These schools are considered exemplars of reform nationally and affiliates of the national Coalition of Essential Schools founded by Dr. Ted Sizer. (Meier 2010)

For 20 years, Meier helped revitalize public schools in New York City’s East Harlem district. In 1974, Superintendent Tony Alvarado asked Meier to test her theories in a new elementary school in Harlem’s District 4, where test scores were the lowest in the city. She founded Central Park Elementary School (CPE), a highly successful alternative school emphasizing active learning. (PBS 2011) Within the next dozen years, Meier opened two other Central Park elementary schools and, in collaboration with the National Coalition of Essential Schools, the Central Park East Secondary School. At CPE and the schools that grew out of it, Meier succeeded by fostering democratic community, giving teachers greater autonomy in the running of a school, giving parents a voice in what happens to their children in schools, and promoting a family-oriented system. The Central Park East Secondary School has been lauded as a model of urban education reform. Her progressive philosophy created an environment of nurturing adults with high standards, resulting in a school with a graduation rate of 90 (90 percent of these graduates going on to college) and is now a model school for the Small Schools Collaborative. (PBS 2011) Some of the traits Meier chose to implement in creating a successful school: a democratic community, autonomy for teachers, giving parents a voice, and fostering a family orientated system I believe are policies public schools can learn from. These policies have proven successful and yet still all are not fully adopted by American school systems, and things like teacher autonomy are actually being scaled back as teachers are exposed to increase pressure, accountability, and specific implementation of curriculum according to the administration. Thankfully educators like Meier are implementing strategies that seem to be working and in effect documenting what actually works in improving our school system.

As a learning theorist, Meier encourages new approaches that enhance democracy and equity in public education. Meier is on the editorial board of [Dissent](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/) magazine, [The Nation](http://www.thenation.com/) and the [Harvard Education Letter](http://www.hepg.org/main/hel/Index.html). She is a Board member of the [Association of Union Democracy](http://www.uniondemocracy.org/), [Educators for Social Responsibility](http://esrnational.org/), the [Panasonic Foundation](http://www.panasonic.com/meca/foundation/), and a founding member of the [National Board of Professional Teaching Standards](http://www.nbpts.org/), the [North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation](http://ndsg.org/) and the [Forum for Democracy and Education](http://forumforeducation.org/), among others.

Deborah Meier has published a plethora of books on education, democracy, and her personal and professional experiences as an educator. Meier documented her story and experience at Central Park East Secondary School in *The Power of their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (1995) [ISBN 0-8070-3111-9](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:BookSources/0807031119). (Wiki 2011) Her other books include, *Will Standards Save Public Education?* (2000); [*In Schools We Trust*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_Schools_We_Trust)*: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization* (2002); with Ted and Nancy Sizer, *Keeping School: Letters to Families from Principals of Two Small Schools* (2004); and co-edited with George Wood, *Many Children Left Behind* (2004), all published by Beacon Press. (Wiki 2011) She serves on the editorial boards of [*The Nation*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Nation), *Educational Policy* and [*Dissent*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissent_(magazine)) magazines, to which she has contributed many articles, including her essay in the 50th anniversary issue of *Dissent*, "On Unions and Education", in which she emphasizes the importance of union collaboration to her success in leading public schools in New York and Boston. Meier regularly speaks and writes on the connections between small schools, [democratic education](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_education), education for democracy, progressive education, and public schooling. (Wiki 2011)

Meier’s avocation of unions in collaboration with the educational beaurocracy seems to be a rare idea these days in the face of union busting across the country with unions being dismantled state by state. When experts like Deborah Meier are saying collaboration among unions and school administration can have a positive effect on educational outcome for our students, why then are we faced with an inevitable drawn out battle between unions and administration, when it has the potential to be a growing partnership where students benefited, instead of becoming causalities of an endless war.

Meier has also participated in a "blog debate" with Steinhardt School colleague [Diane Ravitch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diane_Ravitch) on the website of [Education Week](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_Week) since February 26, 2007. (Wiki 2011) Despite their huge differences in education policy in the early 1990’s, these two debate openly for all to see, and I found this online forum informative and fascinating. I also found that despite past grudges, both Meier and Ravitch have come together to debate, explore, and brainstorm solutions to some of the toughest problems in education that are country currently faces.

Deborah Meier is an educator and scholar that I have grown to admire in my ongoing research into education. Her passion and hard work has inspired me in my ongoing quest to solve the nation’s education problems, improve my practice as a music educator, and inspire my own students to lead successful lives. I can only hope someday I can live up to a legacy as grand as Deborah Meier’s lifetime of accomplishment in the field of education.

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